



## George Orwell's six questions: six rules

All policy advice papers are easier to read when well written. In this masterclass, we give some simple hints from a master of great writing.



George Orwell (real name Eric Blair) was an old Etonian who worked first in the colonial police. In the 20s, 30s and 40s, he was a travel writer (*Down and Out in Paris and London*), a novelist (*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*), an essayist and journalist (*My Country Right or Left*) and finally became a fabulist (*Animal Farm*) and science fiction author (1984).

Through all this, he was dedicated to good writing. And his essay "*Politics and the English Language*", published in *Horizon* in April 1946,<sup>1</sup> forensically examined five passages.

"[They] have not been picked out because they are especially bad [...] – but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer."

Based on his investigation – still worth a read – he came up with two pieces of advice.

First:

"A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:

- 1 What am I trying to say?
- 2 What words will express it?
- 3 What image or idiom will make it clearer?
- 4 Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

- 5 Could I put it more shortly?
- 6 Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

And second:

"[...] one can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

- 1 Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3 If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell->

[foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/](https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/)



## Local Government advice MASTERCLASS

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